Zooming in on COVID

The Intimacies of Screens, Homes and Learning Hierarchies

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ABSTRACT: This article is a result of the way in which the design of a first-year anthropology course attempted to undo stern structural hierarchies between students and teachers. Instead, the participants regarded one another as fellow anthropologists undertaking ethnographic research on the university context. This article examines the intimate relations that came available to participants when the course moved from in-person to Zoom format. Participants moved into homes to document the unfurling COVID-19 crisis, (back) into intimate familial relations. But this was not the only intimacy with which participants had to grapple anthropologically. The lecture materials, too, connected themselves to things and experiences in immediacy as they arrived into homes through laptop screens. The screens themselves offered up new insights into the lives of others – something newly minted anthropologists had to account for as they completed the course.

KEYWORDS: anthropology, COVID-19, hierarchy, learning, screens, senses, teaching, Zoom

In this article, we consider the intimacies lent to learning and teaching via Zoom within the foundation course of social anthropology at the Australian National University. Zoom was the principal platform for delivery during the 2020 pandemic – a medium in which the course has not previously been run. Our article is jointly authored by students who took the course (King, Ranjan and Roth), sessional teachers who ran the face-to-face teaching in online tutorials (Hendershott and Hodayun) and the course convener who designed the course and gave the series of 12 lectures (Dennis). The course was offered via Zoom for two hours of lectures and one hour of tutorials each week. Based on our experience of Zoom teaching and learning in first-year anthropology, we argue that the traditional philosophical position, that assumes that the bearer of the look is separated from others and from things, bears critical inspection. We

suggest that screens do not necessarily restrict us to operating with one another exclusively in the restricted sensory modes of vision and hearing. Throughout, we demonstrate how critical inspection of these ideas reveals the sometimes-uncomfortable intimacies that were made available to us as a result of the circumstances visited upon us by COVID-19.

Zooming Tastefully and Touchingly

Online teaching and learning is certainly different from face-to-face teaching and learning in multiple ways, but often their difference is conceptualised in terms of the absence of full sensory experience in a collectivity. This was certainly the case at our own institution, where the vast majority of teaching is offered in person. Teaching staff and students alike

worried over whether the *in situ* engagement they were used to could be transferred successfully to an online mode, concerns echoed in anxious literature about Zoom in particular (see, for example, Blum 2020 and Sklar 2020). Clearly, there was something about engaging in exclusively visual and audio modes that was understood to be substantively different from encountering one another face-to-face. Of greatest concern was that people would be at the kind of sensory distance that would impact learning and teaching. These concerns find sympathetic ground in the Kantian understanding of how vision itself operates: light mediates between the object and the retina and permits an object to be seen; the thing need not break down in order to be visually detected. In contrast, particles must loosen themselves from the object and come into contact with the olfactory apparatus in order for smell to be detected (Borthwick 2000). The status of the seen bodies lends them their objective status, since no ‘feelingful’ experience is necessary for their reality to be confirmed. Thus, the objective ‘eye-witness’ is included in our legal apparatus in a way that olfactory witnesses are not. Seeing bodies do not extend beyond themselves and into others (and vice versa) to create the body of the public (see Dennis and Alexiou 2018).

Analysis of screen-based meeting platforms like Zoom often begin with this presumption, which is attended by the peculiarities lent to vision by the screen itself. The screen is thought, often, to partition that which is on one side of it from that which is on the other (see Connor 2000). From such objective distance, the surveillance a lecturer can operate in the physical space of a lecture theatre can be maintained, ostensibly without the other sensory engagements that knit students and lecturers together in a community of learning practice. The sense of being placed at objective distance from one another might be expanded to others – like students in the course, who can peer into the replete contexts in which their fellows dwell as they look into loungerooms and peek into kitchens, and even peer into bedrooms, if that is where the student happens to be located with their laptop while participating in a lecture. Students propped up in bed or installed in their loungerooms are simultaneously the subjects of peering themselves, which is something everyone in the class could appreciate during the lecture in which manifestations of class values were discussed based on Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) *Distinction*. Taste, in the form of home décor, could be ascertained in the very moment the lecture was being delivered – Dennis herself carefully positioned her laptop camera so the screen

captured the bookshelves heaving with scholarly tomes, including several of her own published books, rather than her outdated 1970s kitchen littered with discarded packets of two-minute noodles.

Ranjan felt it straight away and later remarked to her co-authors:

My room has an F. Scott Fitzgerald quote and personalised art displayed on the walls. This aesthetic speaks to my values and what I would like to embody when I interact with the world every day . . . these objects [were] imagined anew in the context of a lecture on taste in this context of Zoom-based learning because they were so present with us.

Such dead giveaways of taste that the lecture material asked people to notice could not be effectively veiled by backgrounds like libraries, *Star Wars* ships, or landscapes; they just as effectively remarked on a participant’s habitus and status. If screens could reveal the intimate details of a person’s class status, they could, equally, on the other hand, conceal. Participants might cease video feeds altogether. But revealing and concealing were not ever really contained within one hand or the other. In the wake of a lecture on Taste, turning the video feed off might indicate that the conditions of life were insufficiently tasteful to display: blanking the screen did not remove people from judgements about status. It was no longer safe for students to presume that the greatest risk was having the lecturer think they might not be fully engaging with the lecture materials.

In addition to complexifying our relations with the screen itself, we turn our critical attention to the notion that screens partition and confine us to strictly visual (and audible) relations with one another. This was a notion we worried over at the beginning of the course; as anthropological novices and as experienced disciplinary practitioners, we hold our own assumptions open to critical interrogation.

As Steven Connor (1998) has noted, screens are vulnerable to our tactile attentions and are as sensitive to our haptic attentions as the skin of another person. This is not merely an observation about the material vulnerability of human and object skins, it is an observation about the potential violence of touches directed towards another. Hendershott noticed with rising discomfort, for instance, the expanded opportunity she had to effectively reach out to touch people with a hand full of power. In her role as Zoom meeting co-facilitator, Hendershott had the power to ‘lower someone’s hand’ and mute and unmute student voices – a power she would never have the capacity to physically enact in the classroom. Ex-

perienced as a kind of violent touch by both herself and students, Hendershott had little choice but to wield this power 'to keep tutorials going' on Zoom. But Zoom teaching was also marked by a sensory paucity; as Hendershott also noted, she 'mourned the loss of the noddors', the 'snorters' and the 'mm-mm-mmmers', those who indicated that they understood what she was saying, or indicated their disagreement with her. She lost them when they turned off their videos and audios, and she herself felt lost when they left her. Her screen was sometimes – as Connor (2000) describes it – 'sticky with longing' when it failed to satisfy its promise of being two-way (or, in his term, 'immaculate').

To Visit Is to Go and See

Michel Serres (1985) argues that receptivity, in the Kantian sense, does not in fact characterise viewing, which is not as much about passively looking and seeing (or otherwise receiving) things as it is about 'visiting' with them. The term 'visit' and the verb 'to visit' mean at first 'seeing'; 'they add to it the idea of itinerary – the one who visits *goes to see*' (1985: 334). It was in such terms that our course was conducted in its usual manifestation of face-to-face delivery: it was specifically constructed around the practice of fieldwork as going to see, and especially going to see for oneself. Itinerary is presupposed in a number of ways, for students are expected to move out from expectations about learning a subject at university and into actively deploying a set of newly acquired disciplinary research tools to the culture of the university, of which they have recently become fledgling members. The course assessments are all based around students accessing the initially unfamiliar culture of the university. Under 'normal' circumstances, students apply anthropological imaginaries and skills (taking fieldnotes, producing genealogies, making maps, collecting ephemera, analysing acquired materials) to this new cultural field. The yield of this approach is not only that students acquire an anthropological appreciation of a culture in which they are themselves participants, it is also that they replicate a key anthropological moment: that of entering a new culture for the first time and trying to come to grips with it.¹ In such a position, one produces research of the culture under study, the most valuable product of the institution. Thus, students became producers of valuable knowledge, rather than recipients of it. This, in itself, produced hitherto unavailable intimacy between the structurally, hierarchically distinct posi-

tions of 'teacher' and 'learner'. Each experienced and encountered the institution from a particular structurally given position that enabled differential access to cultural values, practices, narratives, rules, administrative procedures and so on.

Intimate relations between teachers and students were writ even larger when COVID-19 not only forced the course online, but also returned students to their homes – most often their natal family homes. We *went to see* them: almost 150 junior anthropologists found themselves in domestic contexts researching the unfurling COVID-19 crisis. Budding researchers came back with richly-detailed insights, including how people of different generations in their households (typically parents and young adult children) sourced, interpreted and acted upon news, public health messaging, and theories about and numbers relating to cases and deaths; relations with the state and its management of the crisis; how they thought about, acquired and managed resources; how humour and jokes were deployed to cope with or undermine information about cases and deaths; how domestic relations were arranged and re-arranged; and how (and what) tensions arose and abated. Additionally, domestic spaces could no longer be regarded as the backdrop against which the social action of the family took place, but instead made themselves foregrounded as work, study, leisure and schooling jostled for physical and temporal room within walls that – to some researchers – seemed to come in on them.

Some reported how their families took the view that living with the virus was better than fighting it and chose to boost their immune systems by various means, so that when the virus came to call it would find no corporeal hospitality. Some produced fine-grained descriptions and analyses of what the virus looked like, how it travelled, how it stuck to skin and organs with its 'feelers' or tentacles, and how it could be prevented from 'sticking'. It was, variously, red, green, huge, tiny, travelled on air, in water; it was invisible for some, and for others it could be seen miles off – an opinion that grew seemingly in relation to newscasts depicting the virus as a huge tentacled ball looming menacingly, and moving freely, behind television news anchors. One memorable discussion of findings came in a telephone call to Dennis, 'from the field', as the excited student declared, on a Saturday afternoon. She had made the call to share a new finding 'with a fellow anthropologist', an intimacy that Dennis felt immediately cheering. The student was calling to talk about hand-washing and its strict adoption in her family's household. When her mother visited the bathroom and found small red particles in

the bottom of the basin, she screamed and ran to fetch the bleach to kill the coronavirus she thought had collected from the hands of family members around the plug hole. The small red particles turned out to be pilling from a red sweater that the student's elder sister had hand-washed in the sink. While everyone was relieved to find this a case of mistaken identity, the student became interested in how the ordinary stuff of life, the fluff and debris that gathered, had loomed large and menacing when it bore resemblance to the images of COVID on television screens. The student was keen to think through how two-dimensional representations of the virus took the most ordinary of three-dimensional forms, where it rose up to threaten the apparent safety of the home. The student did not end up penning that paper; she was not keen to open this intimate family experience about which her mother was, later, 'almost terminally embarrassed', to assessment. But, both she and her mother were happy for us to reproduce it here, where it would not be attached to the family's name.

Encountering, analysing and writing up these findings occasioned a far higher level of intimacy than an investigation of the culture of the university typically produces. While teachers on the course were familiar with reading about the personal experiences of junior ethnographers coming to grips with an alien culture that they sought to comfortably belong in, such declarations were always rendered in the well-established terms of the commonality of the ethnographer's initial plight: how to become native in any field site. This, and the students' generalised unfamiliarity with the university culture to be explored, allowed some narrow distance between researcher and subject of research.² This vanished when we re-oriented the course to the unfurling COVID-19 crisis, as freshly sprung anthropological imaginations wrapped themselves around course topics and assessment tasks in domestic immediacy, in the intimate spaces of their family homes, and in excited Saturday afternoon phone calls between interested anthropologists. Students were always and already engaged in intimate relations with these topics, which could not be taken as abstract concepts awaiting enlivenment via explorations of university culture; they were embarrassing occurrences involving terror at the bathroom basin.

Intimate Zooming in COVID Homes / Field Sites

One example came during the week we drew on Daniel Miller's (2005) key ideas about materiality to thor-

oughly entail bodies and institutions. Miller notes that objects are important, not because they are evident and physically constrain or enable,

but often precisely because we do not 'see' them. The less we are aware of them the more powerfully they can determine our expectations by setting the scene and ensuring normative behaviour, without being open to challenge. They determine what takes place to the extent that we are unconscious of their capacity to do so. Such a perspective seems properly described as 'material culture' since it implies that much of what we are, exists not through our consciousness or body, but as an exterior environment that habituates and prompts us. (Miller 2005: 5).

Such remarks are particularly pertinent for analysing how the material manifestations of the institution made themselves felt as powerful forces pressing down onto the body. This is easy enough to do in the physical site of the university, where the weight of historical decisions is borne in their legacies as current values and processes, and the physical university spaces that together yield a system of education that appears autonomous. Its force is revealed in an exercise as simple as getting students to notice that they respond to the physical cues given by a lecture theatre and seem to intuitively know where and how they should occupy its space, or by getting them to explore the notion of 'an essay', or having them read the Code of Conduct. But in the homes to which people had been driven by COVID-19, two institutional presences – the home and the university – had to be accommodated in a single site. Roth felt this keenly, as he explored how his parents' domestic house strained to make manifest the material force of the university sufficient to subject Roth himself to patterns of study and academic expectation. It took conversion work to do it, as 'the home took on a role as a place for intellectual work'. He watched with newly-attuned anthropological interest as dining and lounging spaces 'never intended for intellectual work' made awkward transitions to becoming materially evident in their new roles, bringing with them as they did so the weight of institutional values and expectations. He watched, too, as the conversion of 'old bedrooms, the dining room' did precisely what Miller said they would to the people of the household: 'Examples of this included shifts in power dynamics', as some activities deemed the most valuable materially dominated the house in multi-sensory ways; parts of the house set up as study areas brought with them all the institutional force of the university library, subjecting family members to new rules for sensory engagement with one another as the books,

desk and computer demanded that people maintain low voices and quiet demeanours in their presence. Roth also fully appreciated the way in which the material manifestation of his parents' home pushed back against the new order of things, recalling to him 'sites of childhood play' that jostled for prominence against the newly installed computers and rows of books and their institutional bearings and histories. It was hard to insert the university into the home, but when it was installed it wielded its history and expectations and extracted the appropriate demeanours from the people in the house. The lecture on materiality delivered via Zoom lodged itself in intimate relations as Roth sat in his childhood play spaces as a university student. Nothing about this felt abstract. It was not abstract for King either, who experienced this temporally, reporting that she found it 'jarring to live with a full-time essential worker who had kept the same schedule [as before COVID-19] compared to myself who was trying to navigate temporality, balancing strict, scheduled learning periods with the temporal rhythms of the home space'.

Conclusion

Visiting with the university culture was always meant to provide students with a method for taking advantage of the fact that they were alien in a culture at first, just as any anthropologist would be. Repeat visits would ideally render familiar the initially strange, and build anthropological capacity through practice. Conducting the course through Zoom and with discussions on experiences of COVID-19 as it impacted domestic relations, temporalities and spaces demonstrated that visiting can produce displacement, especially when visits are no longer rendered in familiar terms. Visiting is also about reciprocity, as researchers of their own homes tried to strike a balance not only between researching their kin and simultaneously living with them, but also as we visited one another via Zoom. Zoom screens made immediately available all those topics usually rehearsed on university culture in newly intimate ways – there was no safe, abstract distance between learning and application. Bodies became available to one another in new, more-than-visual ways not only as hands were forcefully lowered and raised, voices muted and unmuted, but as ideas and concepts leapt directly out of the screen and into objects, spaces, temporalities and families. The freshly minted researchers could not help but make anthropological sense of the impacts of COVID-19, which no doubt built their disciplin-

ary capacities and skills, but it also made COVID a visitor they could not ask to leave. It had arrived via a Zoom screen, was transmitted via lecturer invitations to see objects, temporalities and relations as an anthropologist might in the immediacy of their own homes, and thereafter had remained a visitor that would not be turned out.

GRACE KING, NIROSHNEE RANJAN and ADAM ROTH are university students who took an introductory anthropology course taught at the Australian National University (ANU) during the worldwide pandemic. **REBECCA HENDERSHOTT** and **SHAMIM HOMAYUN** were their tutors; Rebecca has a PhD in biological anthropology and Shamim is working on his in social anthropology. **SIMONE DENNIS** was their professor, and is Head of the School of Archaeology and Anthropology at ANU.

Notes

1. This teaching practice is an extension of Deane Fergie's (2014) ideas about drawing teaching and research together to resituate undergraduate researchers as producers of the university's key valuable: research. This article itself is an outcome of that model.
2. The remove at which students encountered the culture of the university was various; some had experienced the institution through their academic parents, or through relations that their secondary schools had forged with the university; others had no such reference points to begin from.

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